Alevi - Bektashi Belief in Balkans: A Historical Legacy

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Abstract

With increased immigration, Islam has become a considerable element affecting the relatively homogeneous religious structure of Europe. However, for the Balkan region, instead of immigration flows, historical legacy possessed an important role with respect to Islamic characteristic. With the rise of the Ottoman Empire, Islam spread to the Balkans with significant Alevi-Bektashi characteristics due to the important role of Janissaries who were associated with the Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli in Ottoman political and military structures. Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that Alevi-Bektashi belief had pivotal role in the composition of the religious heritage of Islam in the Balkans; although, it is generally linked with Anatolian region. Today, this belief is being protected as one of the contributors to the historical legacy of religious diversity with functioning dervish lodges and shrines, or gatherings around ruins.

This paper will examine the history and the role of Alevi-Bektashi belief within Islamic faith in and its reflections to Muslim societies of the Balkans in order to understand the contribution of this syncretic belief to religious diversity in Europe as a historical legacy.

Keywords: *Alevism, Bektashism, Balkans, Islam.*

Introduction

Religion has always become an important component of life not only on the individual level but also in society as a whole. It will not be wrong to claim that belief in a creator or none form significant part of identity of a certain society.

Christianity has had predominance over cultural, sociological, political and even in architectural structures in Europe. However, it has not been the only religious component of European people, since there is diversity as a result of immigration, invasion and conquest.

Currently, demographical change concerning religious characteristics of European community is often related to immigration from predominately Muslim countries. Since the second half of the 20th century, western and northern European countries have been one of the most preferred destinations for immigrants. The refugee crisis that Europe has faced recently will cause certain shifts in European cultural and religious dynamics in near future. However, immigration is only *one* of the reasons for religious diversity in Europe. For southeastern Europe, particularly the Balkans, historical heritage plays major role concerning religious characteristics of societies.

Among the Balkan states, in addition to Christianity, Islam is a significant religious component. Instead of immigration, the Ottoman conquest dramatically affected the religious structure and caused permanent social changes. Accordingly, for southeastern Europe, the *relatively* homogeneous religious form of entire continent loses its structure and a heterogeneous one emerges. This heterogeneous form is composed by not only variety of major religions but also inner diversity in Islam as well as Christianity.

Today, when one considers Islam in Europe it is always linked with immigrants; however, in the Balkans historical legacy becomes the main reason concerning the existence of Islam. This research study will examine the role of Alevi-Bektashi belief representing Islamic faith in Balkans by highlighting its historical roots. The origin of Alevi-Bektashi belief in Balkans will be analyzed in order to understand its contribution to religious diversity in Europe.

1. Historical Root of Alevism/Bektashism and its Arrival in the Balkans

Concerning Alevi-Bektashi belief, there is one point that should be clarified in order to avoid any misunderstanding. It is possible to find separated analysis for Alevism and Bektashism, as they can be considered as different traditions. From a contrary perception, Alevism and Bektashism evolved as parts of one concrete belief system, as they both have creed in Caliph Ali, respect the doctrine of Haji Bektash Veli, and share cultural, traditional and religious values. Regardless of aforementioned two interpretations, the Alevi-Bektashi belief possesses its importance since it separates from the Sunni doctrine, which is the major doctrine of Islam. Alevi-Bektashi belief has its own practices such as *cem* ceremonies, 12-days-fasts during the month Muharram (instead of one-month-fast of Ramadan) and considerable fellowship to Caliph Ali, since they repeat his name in their testimonies (Alevi Tören ve Ritüelleri, 2005).

Both Alevism and Bektashism have been originated from the same traditions originated among the nomadic Turkmen tribes; however, they were formulated differently. Since Bektashi *tekke*s (lodge) were used as a tool to Islamize recently conquered territories in the west, the Balkans, by the Ottoman Empire. The Bektashis were settled in urban places as a result of state policy concerning recently conquered territories, while Alevis of Anatolia remained in rural areas (Mélikoff, 2006, pp. 101-3). This is the point, where different approaches have occurred about the relation between Alevis and Bektashis. While some scholars claimed that Bektashism is a part of Alevism (Eyüboğlu, 1989, p. 66), some scholars argued that Alevis were the "rural Bektashis" of Anatolia to unify these two groups with the base of settlement difference, like Fuat Köprülü (as cited in Mélikoff, 2006, p. 33) and they were to be named as Alevis after the 19th century (Hür, 2013). Today, these two names are used almost synonymously, which is not completely correct; however, using them together refers the entire belief system. Since the existence of Alevism in Balkans was formed around Bektashi *tekke*s, this study analyzed it as a whole and referred as Alevi-Bektashi belief.

Alevi-Bektashi belief has a syncretic structure that has been affected by many different religious systems. The first components belong to Central Asian Turkic customs, as nomad Turkmen tribes played significant role within the process of the formation of this belief. By the end of 11th century, and most specifically during the 12th and 13th centuries, Turkmen tribes started to emigrate to the west (to Anatolia, the territories under the rule of Seljuk Sultanate of Rum) escaping from Mongol invasion (Mélikoff, 1998, p. 1). With the emigration of Turkmen tribes, a three-year *religio-political* revolt, Baba'i Revolt was carried out under the leadership of Baba Ishaq, a popular Turkmen preacher, against the rule of Sultanate. Since then, syncretic belief started to be affected by Anatolian traditional and cultural components. Eventually, today's Alevi-Bektashi belief has been evaluated within hundreds of years, and it was enriched by various different belief systems and cultures within this historical process. Its syncretic characteristic has been composed by Shamanism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam within its evolution throughout history (Kressing, 2002, p. 68; Mélikoff, 2006, p. 117-126).

Haji Bektash Veli, who immigrated with Turkmen tribes to Anatolia, was a Muslim mystic philosopher, a Sufi, from Khorasan (historically this refers to the territories of north eastern and eastern part of current Iran). He was not a part of the Baba'i Revolt and settled in Anatolia, in Nevşehir (Soluca Kara Öyük), central Anatolian city, where his tomb is found. Haji Bektash Veli, although he did not form a systematic doctrine himself, became the eponym of a religious order after his death. Despite different records of his death in different sources, he is believed to die before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire (1299). He was peer with Sheik Edebali, the father-in-law of the first Ottoman Sultan Osman I; hence, direct interaction of him with further Ottoman Sultans cannot be possible due to age discrepancy (Mélikoff, 2006, p. 25). He was considered as a good Muslim, although he was not practicing within a recognized form of Islam, such as prayers five times a day (Mélikoff, 2006, pp. 54-55). He did not institutionalize a systematic order during his lifetime. During the first years of the 16th century Balım Sultan was assigned as the head of Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli (*postnişin*) by Sultan Bayezid II, and he transformed Haji Bektas Veli's doctrine into an order by taking little

*tekke*s under the control of Dervish Lodge (Bahadır, 2010, p. 238).

Neither was Haji Bektash Veli alive during Ottoman period, nor did he form a systematic doctrine or possess pupils in order to convey his thoughts. However, he affected the Ottoman Empire with indirect influences in military and social orders. His ideas are believed to be respected personally by first Ottoman Sultans, as his dervish lodge was built and enriched by different sultans. His tomb is claimed to be built by Murat I, the third Sultan, and it was enlarged by Bayezid II, the eighth Sultan, who respected Haji Bektash Veli and visited the tomb in person (Faroqhi, 1976, p. 184). In some sources, a significant amount of financial donation made by Murat II, the sixth Sultan was mentioned (Yücel, 1975, p. 36; "İlçemiz" n.d.). However, the period of Selim I, the ninth Sultan, who took the Caliph title from Mamluk Sultanate with the Battle of Ridaniye in 1517 and made Ottoman sultans to become leaders of Muslim World dominated by Sunni Islam, is not clear in terms of any support to Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli. According to different sources, the same support was either kept by further Ottoman sultans ("Hacı Bektaş" n.d.), or cut (Faroqhi, 1976, p. 185).

During the Ottoman Empire, Alevi-Bektashi belief had possessed importance due to existence of Turcoman tribes; however, the most important influence was made with connection between Janissary corps and Bektashi order. When the first military force named Janissaries (*Yeniçeri* – literally means 'New Soldier') was established by Murat I, it was connected to the Bektashi order (İnalcık, 1973, p. 194). Janissary corps was not only responsible with military, but also they were used to Islamize recently conquered territories by building *tekke*s and small dervish lodges (*zaviye*) (Mélikoff, 2006, pp. 101-3). The belief was spread to Balkans, as a consequence of this policy.

Religious diversity, even before the arrival of Islam, was visible in Balkans with the existence of Orthodox and Catholic Christianity (Schwartz, 2010). With Ottoman conquests, after 14th century, Islam started to be spread. However, according to some scholars, Bektashism had started to settle in Balkans even before the conquests thanks to voluntarily immigrated Turcoman dervishes (İnalcık, 1973, p. 194; Barkan, 1942, p. 293). According to Barkan, those voluntarily immigrated Turcoman

dervishes settled around edge of water sources and established their *tekke*s and *zaviye*s in order to contact with the local people. Additionally, these establishments served to help further immigrants, who established their villages around these *tekke*s over time and became the centers of urban areas.

The most important dervish who affected the social structure of Balkans is believed to be Sari Saltik. He was a peer with Haji Bektash Veli and is believed to have been sent to the Balkans (Gölpınarlı, 1995, pp. 45-6) as the first dervish arrived in 1263 (Aslan, 2012), in order to spread Turkic and Sufi based Islamic traditions. Additionally, Seyyid Ali Sultan, another dervish who settled in Balkans, formed his *tekke* in Didymoteicho in the 15th century, and contributed in Islamization of the territories (İzeti, 2005, p. 521). This and further dervishes` effects have been valuable; nevertheless, the most significant effects were seen with the collaboration between the Janissary corps and the belief.

Janissary soldiers were recruited from Christian youth, who were converted to Islam before the service, from recently conquered territories. In addition to military capability, they were well educated in terms of Islamic and Turkic traditions by being sent to Turkish villages in Anatolia (İnalcık, 1973, p. 194). As followers of the Alevi-Bektashi belief, the corps followed the doctrine in religious perspective. With the connection of Alevi-Bektashi belief and Janissary corps, the order gained significant power; although, it was not compatible with Ottoman religious structure. With respect to this official connection, Janissary corps became inseparable from Bektashi order as the only institution in which the order was tolerated. While a Bektashi leader permanently resided with the corps, even he used to attend wars with soldiers, every new assigned leader of Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli used to visit the barracks to be crowned (İnalcık, 1973, p. 194). Within this organization, Janissaries used to function as colonizer powers of the Empire with the help of Bektashi *tekke*s (Mélikoff, 1998).

Heart of Janissaries possessed more importance with expanding territories, as they succeeded in the battlefield during wartime. Success of Janissaries positively affected state policy over Bektashi *tekke*s in Balkans. Meanwhile, *tekke*s were also successful in their mission, which was to

Islamize recently conquered Christian territories. Additionally, leaders of these *tekke*s used to have responsibility for maintaining social order over the territories (Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 157). These dervishes, who had not been subjected to strict madrasa education, this is to say strict Sunni Islamic education, treated the entire population within a more tolerated way regardless of religious and ethnic differences. As opposed to Anatolia, Arabic and/or Persian cultural and traditional effects could not reach to the Balkans; hence, dominance of traditional Turkic culture could be purely maintained (Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 158).

Bektashism was spread over Balkans as a result of systematic Ottoman policy. Its version of Islamic practices was easily adapted for instance no obligation of strict rules of Islam like five-times prayers and Ramadan fasts, or resemblance of judgment parts of *cem* ceremonies to Christian confession. Within this atmosphere and favorable social leadership of sheiks, *dede*s and *baba*s of *tekke*s attracted the attention of local society and made them adherents of the order (Buechsenschuetz, 2002). Birge (1996, p. 22) mentioned that the social integrity of women as another reason why Alevi-Bektashi belief was accepted by Balkan people.

Alevi-Bektashi belief was not the only representative of Sufism in Balkans; despite of being the sole not-Sunni-based order (Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 159). However, during the 15th and 16th centuries, it was Alevi-Bektashi order that had the dominance over other Islamic orders (Aslan, 2012). Eventually, the belief found a base for itself and settled in (according to the contemporary political map) Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The success of Janissaries in battlefields and *dede*s-*baba*s in Balkan villages in terms of spreading cultural and religious values paved the way for considerable support from the Ottoman Dynasty. Besides, due to its geographical location, Bektashis of Balkans were favored, as they were considered more loyal to the state, while Anatolian Alevis were considered *threat* due to their interaction with the Safavid Empire after 16th century. Anatolian Alevis were punished by Selim I as a result of this interaction, and his period is mentioned as the first "mass targeted attack" to Alevis who were *massacred* by the army of Selim I on his way back to the capital after the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) against the Safavid Empire (Tol, 2007,

p. 43). With references to Ottoman assessment records, Bahadır (2002, p. 169) argued that 16th century's oppressive conditions concerning Anatolian Alevis caused them to escape from Anatolia to secured territories such as Dobruja (a historical territory, currently shared by Bulgaria and Romania) and Albania. In addition to escapes, many Anatolian Alevis were deported to Balkans by Ottoman *ferman*s (Aslan, 2012). The Ottoman Empire managed to maintain the Balkans secured as contrary to Anatolia (Aslan, 2012).

After the late 16th century, the Janissary system started to lose its functionality. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Janissaries revolted against the Dynasty and the corps was accused of being the reason of Empire's weakening power; eventually, in 1826, Heart of Janissaries was abolished by Sultan Mahmud II, 30th Sultan. With the abolishment of Janissary corps, most of the Janissaries were killed (Mélikoff, 1998); the official status of Bektashi *tekke*s changed, most of them were destroyed, sold, or taken by Sunni based orders (Clayer, 1996, p. 469), most specifically by Naqshibandi order due to its loyal stand to official Ottoman Islamism (Mélikoff, 2006, p. 211). After the abolishment, the order lost its power in the Empire and it was hidden from the authority; however, its adherents did not disqualify themselves. It caused considerable demographic changes.

With the closure of *tekke*s, the Ottoman Empire placed restrictions religious liberty of adherents; nevertheless, Balkans remained relatively secure for them. Hasluck (1973, p. 538) referred to Albania as a shelter for those escaped from Anatolia due to strict Ottoman policies. Later in the 19th century, with immigrated adherents, *dede*s and *baba*s, many *tekke*s were built. The political and military power over the Empire was lost; however, the order maintained its *regional* power. Among all these territories, at the end of 19th century, the order gained more importance in Albania since Albanians integrated nationalism in their doctrine, while Alevi-Bektashi adherents in Anatolia integrated it with the Young Turks movement (Clayer, 1997, p. 126).

2. Balkans and Alevi-Bektashi Belief Since the 20th Century

Ottoman rule lasted four centuries in Balkans and affected in demographic, ethnic and religious levels. With the help of Ottoman settlement policy, Turkic culture with a different interpretation of Islam became an important component of diverse Balkan structure. Today, these cultural components maintain their existence among minority groups, in certain states, while each of them has its historical background. In this part of the study, Alevi-Bektashi belief will be examined by regions, where it gained significant characteristic within local cultural structure, to see its actual functionality and contribution.

Among entire Balkan states, where Alevi-Bektashi belief found a base for itself, Albania possesses significant importance as a result of self-declaration of independence from the order based in Turkey and of possession of leadership (*postnişin*) in Tirana, the capital.

As aforementioned, the abolishment of Janissary corps and consequent closure of Bektashi *tekke*s caused order's adherents to escape to Balkans, most specifically to southern Albania. Until 1920s, Bektashis in Albania were tied to Bektashis in Anatolia due to *unofficial* leadership of the Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli; however, many steps were taken afterwards and those all changed the status of Bektashism in Albania. First, in 1920, Bektashism was accepted officially as a *komunitet*, as well as Sunni Islam, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. Three congresses were held in 1921, in 1924 and in 1929, and pivotal theme of these congresses became independence of the order from Turkey. When the last congress was held, the Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli had already been disqualified by the Republic of Turkey with respect to 1925-Closure of Tekkes and Dervish Lodges regulation; hence, Albanian Bektashis made a decision to hand over the title of *postnişin* to Tirana, Albania, until the Dervish Lodge of Haji Bektash Veli in Turkey would be granted with its rights and official leadership (İzeti, 2005, p. 523). After this declaration, then *postnişin* in Turkey (Salih Niyazi Dedebaba, who had Albanian origin) moved back to Tirana, where became the World Bektashi Center in 1931 (Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe [CEDIME-SE], 2000, p. 7). The shift of leadership has

never been accepted by Bektashis of Turkey; and meanwhile the Dervish Lodge in Turkey has not been granted with official status, yet.

Albania, in terms of religious characteristic, has an exceptional status, as it became the first atheist state of the world with the ban of any religious activity and closure of religious places, such as churches, mosques, and *tekke*s, in 1967 as an effect of communism, which was applied to Albania by Enver Hoxha (Abiva, n.d.). Until this period, different *postnişin*s leaded the Alevi-Bektashi community; however, with the ban of religious activities, a new *tekke*, as a center in Detroit/Michigan (U.S.A.), which was established in 1954, led the Bektashis of Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. After the fall of communist regime, religion re-gained its place among society as a cultural component and worship places started to function after 1990s.

Today in Albania, Alevi-Bektashi belief demonstrates itself as a social phenomenon instead of a spiritual one. With series of regulations, both during the three congresses in 1920s and before the ban of religious activities, Albanian Bektahism has been transformed and lost its Sufi characteristics and became a part of national identity with considerable patriotism, and its functionality was resembled to *a national church* (CEDIME-SE, 2000, pp. 7-11). Due to lack of reliable information, the exact number of Alevi-Bektashi adherents cannot be estimated; however, according to the report of International Religious Freedom Report of Albania (2007), composed by the U.S. State Department, citizens of Muslim background were counted as the largest religious group with 65-70% and 25% of this Muslim background population was associated with Bektashi doctrine. In addition to Sunni Islam and Alevi-Bektashi belief, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity have their adherents among the society. These four religious groups enjoy religious freedom with respect to actual constitution composed in 1998 as it provides secular state structure.

Throughout history of Albania, historical Bektashi *tekke*s were damaged or handed over with the ban of Janissary corps in the Ottoman period, and with religious restrictions of communist regime. In certain places, only the ruins of old constructions remain. Recently, there has been significant effort to restore the ruins or damaged *tekke*s (Buechsenschuetz,

2002). According to different sources there are different lists of Bektashi *tekke*s of Albania; however, there is not an exact list of properly functioning *tekke*s as these lists contain remaining ruins, as well. When these lists are taken into account, there is one common thing: They all placed in southern cities such as Gjirokastër, Kolonjë, Mallakastër and many others (CEDIME-SE, 2000, p. 2). Additionally, in northern Albania there are two centers with considerable importance for Alevi-Bektashi order; Krujë, the base of the Lodge of Sari Saltik (Togral, 2013, p. 274) and aforementioned Dervish Lodge of Tirana, that serves as the World Bektashi Center despite the disagreement of Turkish Alevi-Bektashis. Currently the Dervish Lodge of Tirana functions with the leadership of Bektashis of Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo, as the Bektashi Center in Detroit used to do, independent from regional religious authorities (İzeti, 2005, p. 524).

Bulgaria has been a destination of deportations during different periods of Ottoman history due to *disloyal* attitudes of Anatolian Alevis towards the Ottoman Empire. With respect to geographical differences that led to ritualistic ones among entire belief system, Anatolian Alevism had been in direct interaction with the Safavid Empire. Accordingly, instead of Sufi dominance like in Balkans, Shi'i based Twelver culture had been more effective in Anatolia. As a result of deported Alevis' resettlement in Bulgaria, Alevism in Bulgaria has demonstrated much more similarity to Anatolian Alevism.

As mentioned earlier, Dobruja became the land where people made to settle and they spread to a wider geography in present's Bulgarian territories. Currently, as mentioned by Dönmez ("Günümüzde Bulgaristan," 2011), Alevis of Bulgaria reside mixed with Sunni Muslims and Christians mostly in Varna, Razgrad, Targovishte, Karnobat, Haskovo and Silistra. According to the Chairperson of Cem Association of Razgrad, Veysel Bayram (2007), the number of Alevis in aforementioned territories had decreased dramatically, as a result of immigration flows heading back to Turkey in different periods.

During the communist regime of Bulgaria, Alevism has been negatively affected since importance of religiosity decreased. Ahmet Hezarfen ("Bulgaristan'da Alevilik" n.d.) claimed that during 1985, while

the assimilation policy of communist regime was aiming to *neutralize* ethnic Turks, many tombs were damaged. However, after the fall of communist regime, Alevis of Bulgaria are believed to be organized and reawakened the identity with development of social and cultural relations by founding new associations or organizing events, as mentioned by Bayram (2007). Cem Association of Razgrad is one of the concrete results of these initiatives. As another example, Sevar, where is a majorly Alevi populated (its population is 2500) village in Ruse, has hosted annual Demir Baba Events, which are being organized in May in order to maintain the Alevi culture alive and Alevis together, for more than a decade (Aslan, 2012).

According to the information obtained from the Cem Association (as cited in Aslan, 2012), currently there are approximately 46 Alevi-Bektashi *tekke*s in Bulgaria, and 10% of ethnic Turks are defined as adherents of Alevi-Bektashi belief. As in the situation of Albania, most of these 46 *tekke*s are extremely damaged and about to fall over due to lack of maintenance. Important *tekke*s of Alevi-Bektashi belief in terms of historical significance and actual functionality are as following:

Otman Baba Lodge in Haskovo, that keeps its importance for Alevi-Bektashis of not only Bulgaria but also Balkans (Kökel, 2007), and Demir Baba Lodge in Ruse, which was damaged significantly with the abolishment of the Janissary corps; however, with its remaining part, it becomes the *tekke* where annual ceremonies take place and keeps its importance (Küçük, 2010, p. 320).

The policy of spreading Islamic culture throughout Balkans was carried out with success in Macedonia. Cultural effects of the policy have been significant in terms of individuals' daily life. Currently, Macedonian Bektashis search legal ways both in national and international arena in order to be granted with religious freedom, and to take over the territories and historical worship places, which used to belong to the order. Alevi-Bektashi population resides majorly in Tetovo, Skopje and Kičevo (Togral, 2013, p. 275).

The most important *tekke* of Macedonia, Harabati Baba Tekke, was established in 16th century in Tetovo and it functioned until 1945, when it

was expropriated in order to be transformed into hotel and commercial area (Küçük, 2010, p. 325; Schwartz, 2010). In present day, Bektashi leaders claim that they are the owners of these places, which are subjected to national courts. In addition to Harabati Baba, there is a bunch of little *tekke*s, again with questionable functionality, mostly in aforementioned cities (Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 152).

Macedonian Bektashis made an official complaint to the European Court of Human Rights, since their attempt to be recognized by the state as an autonomous religious community was declined in national level (Georgievski, 2013). The Bektashis of Macedonia are claimed to be under the control of the Islamic Community of Macedonia, which was established in 1994 and presented itself as the representative of all Macedonian Muslims. However, in practice, they, the Bektashis, do not belong to any religious organization in Macedonia (CEDIME-SE n.d.:18).

Seyyid Ali Sultan and his contribution in Didymoteicho/Greece have already been mentioned. The Lodge of Seyyid Ali Sultan is one of the oldest *tekke*s of Balkans and with systematization of the order it became one of the most important *tekke*s. However, as many other *tekke*s, it was damaged significantly after the abolishment of Janissary corps. Today, the only existing part of *tekke* is the tomb of Seyyid Ali Sultan (Küçük, 2010, p. 311). Despite the structural deficiency, which is intended to be developed by a dedicated foundation, it maintains its importance, as it still is the place where Alevi-Bektahi people of neighborhood gather in order to keep the tradition alive.

In addition to the Lodge of Seyyid Ali Sultan, there are various ruins of historical ones in actual territories of Greece. They mostly reside in Feres, Crete, Ioannina, and Thessalonica (Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 150-1).

Territories of actual Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo had been the places where Alevi-Bektashi belief was spread, as well. Mostar, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Konjic in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Prizren, Peć and Gjakova in Kosovo are the places where Alevi-Bektashi dervishes settled and formed their *tekke*s throughout the history (Küçük, 2010, p. 327; Bakırcı & Türkan, 2013, p. 152). Additionally, Bakırcı and Türkan

(2013, p. 152,156) listed Romania and Hungary as other places where Alevi-Bektashi dervishes lived and communicated with local people in order to spread Turkic and Islamic culture due to existence of small numbers of *tekke*s.

Conclusion

The Ottoman rule over Balkans lasted four centuries, and within this period, ethnic and religious structures were dramatically changed. With the time passing, despite many restrictions, these components have not entirely vanished, and today still exist.

Alevi-Bektashi belief, thanks to its syncretic structure, can be considered unconstrained way of transformation to Islam. As contrary to well-known Islamic rituals, such as Ramadan or daily prayers, the dervishes of Alevi-Bektashi belief demonstrated a more tolerant way of spiritual closeness to Islam with respect to their pre-Anatolian central Asiatic religious components. Additionally, this structure of Alevi-Bektashi belief paved the way for mutual adaptation between local tradition and accumulated syncretic one. Several different scholars have mentioned the tolerance of dervishes toward local people in cultural and religious transformation.

The success of the Janissary corps in rise of the Empire was another pivotal factor as to why Alevi-Bektashi culture was welcomed by local Balkan people. In other words, the political power that *tekke*s used to have as a result of Janissary collaboration in addition to dervishes' strategic mission on protecting the borders had attracted their attention. Briefly, cultural, political and military achievements of the collaboration between Janissary and Alevi-Bektashi belief made the order and their representatives more favorable among the society.

Alevi-Bektashi belief enriched the local tradition while it was forming its own characteristics among the local culture. Besides, this formation was not a replica of any existing culture, as the period of settlement in Balkans was not long later than arrival of dervishes to

Anatolia. In other words, the formation of Alevi-Bektashi belief in Anatolia and in Balkans was carried out almost simultaneously.

If one considers Alevi-Bektashi belief within regional conditions, its localization can be seen even more visible. For instance, in Albania it involved in national movement, as important as the possession of world leadership; in Macedonia, they ask for official recognition as a legitimate religious component of Macedonian people; in Bulgaria they mobilize around associations in order to maintain their religious and cultural identity. What does that mean for Europe?

Alongside the thumping majority of Christian population, Muslims form a minor percentage in continental Europe. Besides, this minor percentage is majorly formed by Muslims immigrated to western and northern European states, and it is getting more and more significant as a result of recent refugee flows coming from Syria. Among all these Muslims, the dominance belongs to Sunni Islam, unsurprisingly, as it is the largest branch of Islam in general; however, Alevi-Bektashi belief found a base for itself in certain geographies by being recognized, for instance in Denmark, Austria and Switzerland. In southeastern Europe, Alevi-Bektashi belief is a component of social structure; nevertheless, this time it exists as a local culture and tradition thanks to historical legacy.

Throughout the history, Alevi-Bektashi belief in the Balkans was impeded in different times; first in 19^{th} century with the abolishment of Janissary corps, and second, during 20^{th} century with the communist regime by certain restrictions concerning not only the said order, but also entire religious activities. Additionally, with immigration flows back to Turkey during history of the Republic of Turkey, the volume of population has decreased dramatically. However, thanks to significant endeavors in different Balkan countries, Alevi-Bektashi belief still exists and maintains its cultural and traditional values. If one thinks about the religion in Europe, the first one comes to mind will be Christianity; however, it is not the sole religion, as Islam in Europe is not just Sunni Islam. With its distinctive culture and syncretic structure, Alevi-Bektashi belief has its adherents in the Balkans as a component that enriches the understanding of Islam in Europe.

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